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Diversity in under-researched countries: new empirical fields challenging old theories?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to further restore diversity and equality to its national contexts by presenting new and so far less visible perspectives from under-researched countries.

Design/methodology/approach – This special issue consists of five articles representing four countries and one country-cluster: Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Korea and the English-speaking Caribbean. Three of the contributions are focused on gender diversity, while the remaining two are more general descriptions of diversity challenges and policies in the respective countries (namely, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the English-speaking Caribbean).

Findings – In addition to providing an overview of this issue's articles, this paper highlights developments and current themes in country-specific equality and diversity scholarship. In particular, drawing on the special issue's five papers, and building on the main threads that weave the special issue together, the authors show both the relevance of (some) western theories while also pointing to the need for reformulation of others.

Research limitations/implications – The authors conclude with a call to further explore under-researched contexts and especially to develop locally relevant, culture-sensitive theoretical frameworks.

Originality/value – How do smaller and less developed countries experience equality and diversity concepts? How are their approaches different from those experienced in already researched countries, or, on the contrary, what commonalities can be found among them? How do theoretical frameworks originated in the West apply (or not) in these less studied countries? Are new, locally grounded frameworks needed to better capture the developments at play? Such are questions addressed by the contributions to this special issue.

Keywords Gender, Equal opportunities, Social policy, Diversity, Multicultural societies, Sexual orientation

Paper type Viewpoint



Introduction

In many countries, managing diversity is on the political and business agenda, and has become an area of knowledge and practice in its own right. Yet all too often, diversity management (DM) and diversity research are historically rooted in “the West,” i.e. concepts are dominated by the work of US-American and Western European scholars, mono-culturally infused and biased (e.g. Jonsen *et al.*, 2011; Nishii and Özbilgin, 2007). At the same time, we know that diversity and equality can neither be treated as a unifying concept, nor

be interpreted uniformly across cultures and countries, as highlighted in country-specific and comparative perspectives on equal treatment and diversity, edited by Klarsfeld (2010), Syed and Özbilgin (2010) and Klarsfeld *et al.* (2014, 2016a, b). While being of high value for the development of context-sensitive equality and diversity research, these contributions primarily focus on western democracies (see e.g. Klarsfeld, 2010), while voices from Asia and Africa rarely find their way into internationally acknowledged outlets.

There are two possible explanations for this marginalization of perspectives on diversity and equality: first, due to a lack of resources in certain countries, there are less research activities (e.g. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2019). This situation causes a brain drain in which scholars from these countries emigrate to more research-facilitating contexts (e.g. Docquier and Rapoport, 2012), and later might lose the connection with their country of origin. Second, due to biases in editorial and review processes and limited geographical outreach of management journals (e.g. Özbilgin, 2004), it is more difficult for scholars from marginalized regions to publish their locally grounded research. More than once, as non-US scholars, we have been confronted with the “why this country” question asked by a reviewer of a US journal, and this becomes all the more acute as the country is seen as marginal relative to the western sphere of influence. In our initial planning and reflection on this special issue, we felt that even if there was nothing we could do about the first explanation, we wanted to address the latter. Therefore, we explicitly called for contributions from “under-researched countries” in order to give voice to E&D scholarship from largely neglected geographical regions.

Our initial call attracted 28 submissions and we received manuscripts from across the globe covering five continents and eventually compiled this special issue with insightful contributions on Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Caribbean, Ethiopia and (South) Korea. This supports our assumption that, despite the difficulty of reaching out for studies that engage in non-universalistic and context-sensitive research, a broader geographic coverage and a representation of diverse perspectives are possible.

In this introductory paper, we review the history of context-sensitive perspectives on diversity and equality, and contextualize this volume’s five contributions in a review of current themes within this research domain. We conclude with recommendations for future research.

The history of context-sensitive perspectives on diversity and equality

Despite progress toward more equality in many countries, historically disadvantaged groups such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people of various “origins” or characteristics still face discrimination and exclusion at work globally. Yet, their marginalization is context dependent. That is, not only do social categories vary by country (e.g. “Bumiputras” in Malaysia, migrants in Europe, “first nations” in Canada and “designated groups” for affirmative action (AA) in South Africa), but also the treatment of people who are considered to belong to these categories varies, often regulated by law (e.g. outcome measures such as quotas, “reservations” or “set-asides,” in Malaysia vs goals and timetables to generate progress in Canada and Black Economic Empowerment laws in South Africa).

Early context-sensitive writings on diversity and equality focused on equality legislations (e.g. employment equity (EE) in Canada, equal employment opportunities in the USA and the UK) and slowly started with contributions based on country by country contributions (Agocs, 2002) and comparative research (Jain *et al.*, 2003; Agocs and Osborne, 2009). In their attempt to stretch beyond North America, these first contributions underlined that a variety of models of EE legislations exist: while some are more focused on preferential treatment and quotas, such as in India and Malaysia, others are more focused on process changes, goals and timetables, such as in Canada and the USA, or in Northern

Ireland (Jain *et al.*, 2003). In their attempt to evaluate the outcomes of these policies, the authors of this early work suggested that policies that emphasize gradual changes through the introduction of goals and timetables offer more scope for changing routines than policies focusing on quotas, which perpetuate forms of inequality of treatment.

While these early milestones took more interest in legal concepts such as Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), EE or AA, in the 1990s, a growing body of literature emerged that dealt with DM as a separate concept from equality and AA, yet related to it, focusing on the USA (Thomas, 1990; Cox, 1991; Cox and Blake, 1991; Thomas and Ely, 1996; Kelly and Dobbin, 1998; Edelman *et al.*, 2001) and, to a lesser extent, the UK (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994) and Canada (Agócs and Burr, 1996).

Thomas (1990) and Thomas and Ely (1996) posited that DM was a new paradigm, different from equality and AA, in this, and that the focus is no longer “just” on women and minorities, i.e. designated groups protected by legislation, but on all kinds of differences, such as learning styles, experience, qualifications, etc. By extending the scope of diversity criteria in this way, people belonging to the white majority could, in the end, be participating in DM programs, whereas they were not included by EEO/AA. Another differentiation made between DM and EEO/AA is that DM centers on voluntarism in order to satisfy business needs, whereas that of EEO/AA centers on laws and redress of past injustices. While in a great part of earlier writings it was common to differentiate according to these motives behind introducing DM vs EEO/AA (e.g. Thomas, 1990), other scholars took an integrative stance arguing that equality and business aims complement each other (Cox and Blake, 1991; Liff, 1999). Still, others empirically analyzed whether actual DM practices differed or not from EEO/AA practices. They came to the conclusion that in substance, there were only minor differences between EEO/AA and DM programs (Kelly and Dobbin, 1998). Instead, management rhetoric on the “value of diversity” intended to reword the otherwise resented anti-discrimination rhetoric and to transform it into a new one, more appealing to managers (Edelman *et al.*, 2001), which might also shift the attention away from the categories typical of EEO/AA programs, such as color or gender.

This early DM literature was still very much US centric but for one exception. Agócs and Burr (1996) indeed provided one of the earliest comparative within- and cross-country contributions, within-country, as authors compared DM and AA, both US-centric concepts. Cross-country, as they compared both DM and AA to EE (EE), is a specifically Canadian concept that had started to emerge in the 1980s with adoption of laws intended to address gaps faced by visible minorities, women, the disabled and aboriginal people. In spite of differences, the authors found that AA and EE were both legally driven concepts. Goals and timetables and the search for numerical representation played a central part in them. On the other hand, DM appeared as a voluntary concept with an emphasis on organizational effectiveness and learning. Still relevant to the present day, Agócs and Burr’s analysis suggests that there may be a North American approach, common to the USA and Canada, to legally enforce the compensation of historic disadvantage, with only very few differences, and that DM constitutes a novel business approach in contrast to this shared legalistic North American framework.

Yet, almost ten years after these first mid-1990s writings, that is, in the middle of the years 2000, EEO/AA and DM literatures were still overwhelmingly North American, and little was known about how these concepts, or rather, their translations, had possibly migrated (or not) to other parts of the world. Boxenbaum (2006) was one of the first to address the gap. She provided a vivid account of how DM had been adapted to the Danish context, by taking into account the strong egalitarian and democratic culture of this country, which stands in stark contrast with that of the USA. Adaptation to the Swedish context ran into a similar concern for resistance and imperative of adaptation. An entire special issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Management* was dedicated to

the travel and translation of DM from the USA to other, mainly European, countries (Calas *et al.*, 2009). As it turned out, “translation” went hand in hand with resistance and/or necessity to reformulate DM within commonly agreed national frameworks.

Shortly thereafter, volumes were dedicated to national and/or country perspectives on diversity and equal treatment at work (Klarsfeld, 2010; Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2014; Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2016b), as well as special issues with the *European Journal of Industrial Relations* (Hyman *et al.*, 2012), and *Cross-cultural and Strategic Management* (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2016a). These volumes and special issues further underscored the “diversity of diversity” and the uniqueness of national approaches to diversity and equality. As such, they acknowledge that, for instance, various categories of diversity are relevant in different contexts and that various types of policy arrangements are possible both at the national and at the corporate level based on a continuum between positive discrimination (legally enforced systematic preference for previously disadvantaged groups) and negative discrimination (legally enforced discrimination against already disadvantaged groups) (see Table I). On another note, to date, most contributions are empirical and explorative rather than theory driven. While much has been done to describe, for instance, various legal frameworks and how they are implemented at the national and/or at the corporate level, all too often, this work is done in absence of theoretical foundations.

This special issue finds its place in the stream of research that addresses the need to expand the study of DM beyond the USA, and to question basic assumptions inherent in these concepts as theorized in the USA and later on in Europe. Many non-US countries have indeed been covered to date but among them, there is an overwhelming majority of Western European and/or large or developed economies such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand or South Africa. But how do smaller and less developed countries experience equality and diversity concepts? How are their approaches different from those experienced in already researched countries, or on the contrary, what commonalities can be found with them? How do theoretical frameworks originated in the west apply (or not) in these less studied countries? Are new, locally grounded frameworks needed to better capture the developments at play? Such are questions addressed by the contributions to this special issue.

Type of legislation	Definition
Negative discrimination Laws provide against the criterion	Persons covered by the criterion are discriminated against (e.g. persons having same-sex relationships may face imprisonment)
Legal vacuum No legal protection	The criterion is mentioned by neither equality nor positive action legislation. It might not even be discussed in public or academic debates
Restricted equality of rights No reporting allowed	It is forbidden for employers to directly collect data and report figures on the criterion; action plans cannot target these criteria directly
Equality of rights Reporting allowed	Collecting data and reporting on the criterion is possible. This remains at the discretion of employers
Encouraged voluntarism Positive action encouraged	Collecting data and reporting on the criterion is compulsory, but not the setting of outcome targets, which remain at the discretion of employers. Employers have a broad duty to act, such as to engage in collective bargaining
Constrained process Positive action compulsory	Collecting data, setting targets, acting and reporting progress on the criterion is compulsory. Covered employers must demonstrate good faith action and progress. The target is remote and not binding on the short term. Sanction may apply if there is a lack of “good faith” and progress
Constrained outcome Positive discrimination	Strict targets (quotas) have to be met for the criterion. Systematic preference is given to protected group members. Sanction is imposed systematically when quotas are not met

Source: Klarsfeld *et al.* (2012, p. 401)

Table I.
A continuum of
equality legislations

Context-sensitive diversity and equality research and the contributions in this special issue

Although in recent years, scholars have put a lot of effort into broadening the scope of diversity dimensions and their intersections covered by diversity and equality research (cf. Paisley and Tayar, 2016; Theodorakopoulos and Budhwar, 2015), certain dimensions still dominate the discussion. Out of all original submissions to this special issue, more than half analyze diversity and equality with a specific focus on gender, mirroring that “gender inequality is the oldest and most widespread diversity issue worldwide” (Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2012, p. 396). This is unsurprising given that women make up more than 50 percent of the world’s population while women’s rights, their labor market participation and access to decision-making positions still lag behind those of men. Gender-related topics covered in this special issue range from barriers women face in the high-tech sector in Bangladesh and women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia to managing gender diversity in organizations in South Korea. The remaining two contributions provide a broader and more general overview of different diversity dimensions, related legislation and practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Caribbean.

Furthermore, scholars doing context-sensitive diversity and equality research have emphasized the importance of adopting multi-level perspectives (e.g. Knappert *et al.*, 2018; Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Tatli, 2011), as these allow for “a more comprehensive, realistic and context-specific framing of diversity management” (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009, p. 2435) compared to single-level conceptualizations. This current trend is also mirrored by three contributions in this volume. First, the article on diversity and equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows how societal institutions (on the macro-level) translate into discriminatory practices in companies (at the meso-level). Second, in the study on women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia, we learn how (macro-level) policies and a better organization of networks (meso-level) would help to fulfill entrepreneurs’ individual needs (micro-level). And finally, the contribution from South Korea makes use of the multi-level perspective to capture the influence of a country’s culture (macro-level) on the relationship between organizational gender diversity and organizational performance (meso-level).

Finally, in order to better account for the peculiarities inherent in the country context, scholars studying diversity and equality issues often applied qualitative research designs (e.g. Cooke and Saini, 2010; Jamali *et al.*, 2010; Klarsfeld, 2009; Klarsfeld *et al.*, 2016b; Knappert *et al.*, 2018). This is also reflected in the methods used by the contributors to this special issue. Two author groups point to the explorative character of their study and use qualitative interviews to enhance our understanding of the specific topic and research question (Bangladesh and Ethiopia) while only one study uses a quantitative, survey-based design (South Korea). The other two manuscripts are descriptive in nature and rely primarily on secondary data (Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Caribbean) and a review of the locally relevant national and international literature. Due to the highly under-explored nature of these contexts, it is important to provide this kind of overview of equal opportunity legislation and the limits to their actual implementation as this constitutes the foundations for future research and measures to be taken by practitioners and policy-makers interested in these countries.

In the next several paragraphs, we provide a more detailed summary of the contributions to this special issue. The first three papers focus on gender diversity. The last two have a more general (but less theory driven) focus on diversity in a specific country (Bosnia and Herzegovina) or region (the Caribbean).

The first article, “Walls all around: Barriers women professionals face in high-tech careers in Bangladesh” by Samina Saifuddin, Lorraine Dyke and Md. Sajjad Hossain, explores the context-specific barriers that limit the career opportunities of women professionals in the Bangladeshi high-tech sector. Based on 35 interviews with high-tech

professionals (20 women, 15 men), this paper goes beyond already well-studied obstacles women professionals face in male-dominated industries by contextualizing them and identifying barriers specific to the country context. Two types of barriers are specific to Bangladesh. One refers to the safety (or rather, lack thereof) of public spaces and the impediment to mobility that this represents for Bangladeshi women. For instance, they may be tempted to trade off career advancement opportunities against transport facilities provided by the employer. The other type of barriers rests on conservative norms, in that employees of both genders find it uneasy to work with people of the opposite gender. This negatively affects women's access to networking, which in turns penalizes women's career advancement. The other barriers evidenced by Saifuddin, Dyke and Sajjad have been shown in previous literature to be pervasive in more studied countries of the west, such as the social construction of technology as a male domain, occupational norms hostile to the conciliation of work, family duties predominantly taken care of by women, and dominance of men in the upper echelons of management.

In this special issue's second article "Dreams and reality: Autonomy support for women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia," the authors Atsedo Hailemariam, Brigitte Kroon, Marloes van Engen and Marc van Veldhoven point out that, before Ethiopian women can realize their entrepreneurial dreams, they have to overcome hard obstacles – economic and financial challenges as well as social barriers imposed by gendered expectations. Drawing on self-determination theory, which proposes that the source of endured effort to realize a dream in spite of barriers lies in the degree to which the act of being an entrepreneur is experienced to be autonomous (Deci and Ryan, 2008), the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 women entrepreneurs from different business sectors in Addis Ababa. Based on their findings, the authors sketch a model of "Need satisfaction of Ethiopian women entrepreneurs" in which socio-cultural context (such as gender role and religious affiliation) and individual differences (in terms of specific socialization experiences) intertwine. Certain combinations of contextual aspects and individual differences would either go along with an autonomy orientation and the experience of need satisfaction, or with a control orientation and the experience of need frustration. The authors conclude that more interventions are needed that satisfy basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) for Ethiopian women's entrepreneurial activity. Legal and regulatory policies as well as a better organization of Ethiopian women entrepreneurs' networks would help to fulfill such needs. Hence, the authors conclude, that the "source of endured effort to realize a dream in spite of barriers lies in the ability of the women entrepreneurs to exert autonomous functioning, fostered or hampered by important social agents in their lives, their spouse, parents, and social environment."

The third article "Does diversity management matter in a traditionally homogenous culture?" authored by Si Ahn Mehng, Sang Hyeon Sung and Lisa Leslie explores the relatively early stage of DM in South Korea and attempts to measure the gender diversity-performance link. The authors argue that, due to the impact of collectivism, high power distance and gender hierarchy that places men as superior to women, increased gender diversity in organizations has a negative impact on organizational performance. In spite of increasing access to education for women, the authors posit that women's increasing participation in the workplace is perceived as threatening by men, who invest in maintaining their higher position in the gender hierarchy and do not want to lose their privilege. The authors surveyed 177 human resource managers sampled from 760 organizations. As they hypothesized, they found that the higher the number of female employees, the lower the performance of the organization. However, organizations with high gender diversity and a discrimination-and-fairness diversity perspective experienced higher performance. The authors conclude that, on the whole, organizations with more women employees perform worse than organizations with a lower percentage of women employees

and that discrimination-and-fairness approaches based on law enforcement elicit the best out of gender diversity. They argue that this can be explained by the three aforementioned cultural elements: high collectivism, high power distance and the gender hierarchy that privileges men over women. Whereas there was a correlation between high gender diversity and lower performance, the authors advise caution because it is a correlation rather than causality; longitudinal studies would add credence to their findings that contradict current wisdom about the gender diversity-performance link. Another important finding is that the western triad of integration and learning, access and legitimacy, and discrimination and fairness, used to categorize perspectives on DM (Thomas and Ely, 1996), is not empirically validated in the case of their Korean sample, which questions the universality of this widely used conceptual framework.

The fourth article titled “Diversity and equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina: limits to legislation, public debate and workplace practices” by Renate Ortlieb, Zijada Rahimic, Christian Hirt, Almina Besic and Florian Bieber, provides the first peer-reviewed journal article published on Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in the management field. It shows that the solid body of legislation addressing anti-discrimination and equality in BiH that resembles EU law in many regards is only partly effective. Reasons include generally weak labor market institutions (such as labor courts), high unemployment, and an overall atmosphere marked by social divide that followed inter-ethnic conflict. Similar to countries that have experienced inter-ethnic/religious tensions such as India (Haq, 2012) or Lebanon (Al Ariss and Sidani, 2016), there is “positive discrimination” (as per Table I) under the form of employment quotas in the public sector for the constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs). In this, the law in BiH partly contributes to new forms of inequality and exclusion, as BiH citizens who do not belong to the constituent peoples of BiH are out of the scope of ethnic quotas that prevail in the public sector. This affects, for instance, Roma and Jews who are excluded from said quotas. Including other groups is either blocked or delayed due to high levels of ethnic polarization. Moreover, there is evidence that the complicated situation at the societal macro-level translates into discriminatory practices at the meso-level of private sector business companies, though these companies are in principle not covered by the quota legislation, but rather are supposed to follow an “equality of rights” (as per Table I) more commonly found in most of the European Union. This spillover from the public to the private sector has been observed elsewhere such as in Lebanon (Al Ariss and Sidani, 2016). The paper also studies extensively other diversity strands such as gender, sexual orientation, disability and age, providing further evidence of both complex legal arrangements and persisting, or even aggravated discriminations in comparison to what prevailed in pre-war Yugoslavia.

In the fifth article in this special issue, Jacqueline Stephenson’s and Natalie Persadie’s paper “Anti-discrimination legislation in the Caribbean: Is everyone protected?” is the first of its kind to assess equality at work legislation regarding the English-speaking Caribbean region, against the legacy of a social structure historically composed of an elite class of European plantation owners, a middle class of professionals, civil servants and proprietors and a lower class of former slaves and indentured servants. Although equality is enshrined in the constitutions of the 12 islands which constitute the independent English-speaking Caribbean, to date, only three (Trinidad and Tobago, St Lucia and Guyana) have enacted legislation outlawing disparate treatment on a range of prohibited grounds. The commonly protected grounds are sex, race, religion, ethnic origin, marital status, origin and disability. The focus of the article is on sex, race and religion, the grounds on which discrimination is most prevalent. In their own analysis of extant discrimination legal cases in the Caribbean (11 in Trinidad and Tobago, and each 1 in St Lucia and Guyana), the authors demonstrate how equality law has been applied. In particular, they highlight the necessity for plaintiffs to provide evidence of disparate treatment as well as of a comparator, i.e., persons placed in an identical or comparable situation. This stands in contrast with proof mechanisms adopted in

countries across North America, Europe and other region, where the burden of proof is shared between plaintiff and defendant. Recent cases, however, suggest proof mechanisms have been made more accessible to plaintiffs. The authors lament the omission of sexual orientation as a protected ground of discrimination, and they show that inequalities and disparate treatment continue to prevail within the Caribbean region. Indeed, not only is discrimination based on sexual orientation unprohibited in the countries studied, but their laws negatively discriminate against LGBTQI persons as they actually prohibit same-sex relationships, and as individuals found “guilty” of such relationships may face imprisonment. In the enactment of more progressive legislation, there is opportunity to follow international equality conventions and to overcome cultural and/or religious constraints prevailing in the Caribbean region.

Conclusion and directions for future research

What is clear by exploring these five contributions is that, even when diversity and equality research is focused on non-western contexts, the theories employed as explanatory frameworks continue to be dominated by western theorists. This begs the following question: Are there context-specific and culturally sensitive theories that would provide more perspicacious explanations for the state of diversity and equality in these under-researched contexts? Do the theories so employed offer the most robust explications of what is happening in those contexts? It seems that theoretical proposals based on research developed in the west are partly corroborated in two of the three papers focusing in gender diversity. Especially the one on Ethiopian women entrepreneurs (Hailemariam *et al.*) provides empirical support for self-determination theory while the one on Bangladeshi women professionals (Saifuddin *et al.*) only partly confirms obstacles to women's career progression identified in previous western research and also adds some country-specific concepts to the picture. However, the article on the gender diversity and performance link in Korea (Si Ahn Mehng *et al.*) sheds doubt on the universality of a framework commonly used in US DM research, i.e., the identification of the three distinct perspectives of discrimination and fairness, access and legitimacy, integration and learning. These perspectives had already been questioned in diversity climate research conducted in the context of France (Cachat-Rosset *et al.*, 2017), as well as in the examination of diversity strategies and the business logics to employ migrants in the German context (Ortlieb and Sieben, 2013). Authors of the Korean contribution suggest that DM perspectives relevant in the context of Korea are the business benefits perspective (grouping both the access and legitimacy, and the integration and learning perspectives), the discrimination and fairness perspective, and the assimilationist perspective (as distinct from the discrimination and fairness perspective, contrary to what Thomas and Ely suggest). Such results are highly illustrative of our argument that mainstream theoretical frameworks and their underlying assumptions are not universal. Instead, they may only be partly suitable and empirically relevant in so far under-researched countries as they fall short of understanding and conceptualizing the specific context organizations and individuals are embedded in. Thus, we seek to encourage scholars to question taken-for granted theoretical assumptions before applying them to their specific research setting and to invest in developing contextually embedded theories that better explain the realities of the context in which they are grounded.

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